

Assessing development and democracy in india politics essay



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A strong centred democracy has been at the heart of Indian nationalism since independence with its many languages, religions, ethnicities. In adopting the Westminster parliamentary system, India substituted the monarchy for an elected President and a legislative body consisting of a bicameral structure that includes a lower house - the Lok Sabha and an upper house the Rajya Sabha[2]. India is now the world's largest parliamentary democracy, some 714 million people were eligible to vote in last year's election[3]. Members of the Lok Sabha are directly elected every five years with representation divided among India's States, and seats apportioned according to population. Members of the lower house the Rajya Sabha are indirectly elected by the legislative assemblies of the federal States and the President nominates twelve members to the Rajya Sabha based on distinguished reputations in the realm of the arts, sciences or public service[4]. The president is elected to office for a five year period by members of both houses. All citizens over the age of 18 years, regardless

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caste or religion are eligible to vote and turnout has stabilized at approximately 60%, which is particularly high by international standards[5]. Under Jawaharlal Nerhu's (the first prime minister of India) nationalist ethos encompassing non alignment, socialism and secularism, the latter was the intended safe guard for religious minorities from majority rule.

In an affront to the notion that democracy is a ' Western luxury' that developing countries cannot afford[6], India's body politic has remained markedly stable since independence, a notable exception in post colonial states. It is also viewed as an anomaly because of its incredibly diversified social strata and its ability to continue functioning as a democracy (Kothari 2005). There is no distinction for basis of citizenship along ethnic, religious or caste lines nor has there been any religious qualification for holding office. There has not been any significant state intervention to abolish the caste system[7], although ' untouchability' was made illegal in the Constitution[8]the system has been left undisturbed. Independence and the adoption of democracy has however not resulted in any state-led political agenda of social reform, by in large society has been allowed to reform itself in a laissez faire way.

A proportion of parliamentary seats and a percentage of public sector jobs were/are however reserved for members of Other Backward Castes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). This reserve falls under Positive Discrimination (PD)[9]. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (a member of the untouchable Mahar caste), provided the Dalits with their first real hope of transcending caste discrimination (Luce, 2007), ensuring that equality along caste lines was enshrined within the Constitution[10]. While caste disparity

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has not yet been alleviated in a substantial way, it has given the Dalits a feel for political mobility[11].

Constitutional provisions.

As regards India's post independence economic policy, it adopted a model of self-sufficiency and import substitution[12]. Influenced by the Soviet example of a mixed economy it turned its back on trade and foreign capital imports on the premise of being a self-sufficient industrialised nation[13]. This failed to take capitalize on India's early start in modern industry[14], with it rehashing many of the industries which were already in place but which, were in its view tainted by imperialism. As a result industry suffered (Bhagwati, Desai and Sen, 1997).

Restrictions on interest rates, subsidies to inefficient industries, taxation on movement of agricultural commodities, and perks to labour etc., all resulted in slow growth and employment, and continued poverty and inequality. With slow growth of jobs in the private sector, government jobs became much sought after, a trend which has persisted even now (Luce, 2007). Elections then became the means to access the fruits of patronage, with plebeian groups organizing around their caste and regional identities. Thus it can be argued that the slow growth with a leaning towards elite jobs, and social conservatism has strengthened caste, regional and religious loyalties. With continued slow growth and poverty levels unabated discontent grew and protests mounted from tribal, dalit and lower caste groups, unhinging Indira Gandhi and leading to the Emergency. Amid mounting pressure over her

failure to 'remove poverty' Indira Gandhi suspended democracy in 1975 declaring a national state of emergency.

The Emergency

The mixed economy combined the worst features of capitalism and socialism (Das, 2006). Mrs. Gandhi called for a 'committed' bureaucracy that would be openly socialist, this tainted the neutrality of the civil service and led to a sharp increase in corruption. She was also responsible for nationalising the banks and insurance sectors, in the name of the poor she handed control of finance to an unreformed civil service. India's banking system became wholly inefficient which drastically raised the cost of capital for everyone. At this time she also presided over unpopular large-scale sterilization as a national form of birth control and many fell victim to her large scale slum clearance programmes. The activism of associational groups during this time advances the argument that India's civil society should be the engine for democratisation. With the Swadeshi model, India's average per capita growth was half that of the developing world which as a whole was almost 3% from 1950 to 1980 (Das, 2006).

The protectionist and anti-foreign sentiment that drove it to the brink of bankruptcy just over a decade ago when it had only three weeks of foreign currency reserves in its coffers. Many of the leaders that ruled India after the British left in 1947, like Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, feared further influence of foreigners and established a practice of strict self-reliance, known

as swadeshi. These governments subsidized many Indian industries, never allowing foreign companies to compete

and thereby never allowing its own industries to excel. Such subsidies have long been a drain on the country's

economy, accounting for as much as 14 percent of its GDP.

As a result of such protectionism and subsidies, many industries within India have remained stagnant. Indians are

incredible farmers who could likely rival the U. S. in agricultural production.

But the government doesn't allow people to

own more than 18 acres. This is driving out many productive producers.

The 1980s

Following the election of the Janata party and the ousting of Indira Gandhi and emergency rule a new India emerged one which was no longer administered along old elite lines.

Single party dominance was restored during the 1980s with the return of Congress to power. Mrs. Gandhi reinvented the Nehruvian vision maintaining the rhetoric of socialism but changing the content. Her time in office saw a relaxation of the economic self-sufficiency ethos and socialism or 'dirigisme' was backed up by international borrowing. Economic institutions like permit-license Raj remained intact and there was no relaxation of domestic economic policy in parallel with foreign borrowing[15], it did however lead to higher growth[16]. The Green Revolution was also now routinely yielding

good harvests alleviating the necessity to import food[17]. With better prospects in the private sector the appeal of public sector jobs began to wane somewhat. Significantly secularism was increasingly compromised under Mrs. Gandhi's populist accommodation of Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies.

This created room for meeting the next explosion in subaltern demands which V P Singh tried to accommodate by undertaking to implement the Mandal recommendations.

As India had not restructured its economy, its autarchic orientation continued and this meant that insufficient export income was generated to pay back the foreign debt. The economy crashed as it became unable to service its debt[18].

The liberalization reforms

1991 is a significant date in modern Indian history. It is difficult to gauge whether India's political or economic conditions have changed more since that date. Under the balance-of-payments crisis of 1991, the Congress-led government pushed for greater economic transformation and reform. This heralded the end of the mixed economy, self sufficiency as a model was abandoned. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (the then finance minister), argued that macroeconomic stabilization had to be reinforced by reforms to make the decision-making and operational environment of firms more market-based (Varshney, 2007). India's growth and economic trajectory since the introduction of reforms is extraordinary not only because it has taken place in the context of a democracy but also in so far as it has adhered

to a unique development model[19]. Its' economy is based on domestic consumption rather than exports, is focused on services rather than low-cost manufacturing as was the case in many of the Asian Tiger economies, (despite India's enormous low-cost labour reserve which would naturally lend itself to labour-intensive manufacturing)[20]. India has taken advantage of the skills of its educated middle-class in boosting its services sector which now accounts for more than half of its GDP[21]. In this regard the reforms have effected mainly an elite and the educated middle class. Growth hasn't been employment intensive on the whole, between 1993/94 and 2004/05 the rate of employment growth declined significantly to 1.85% from the previous 10 years when it went up a little over 2% on average. Similarly there has been a fall in the growth of real wage rates.

India's development model is now much more dependent on the corporate sector. It has been losing regulatory controls such as the "license permit quota raj" and has embraced international openness to a greater extent. The private sector has been the principal driver of growth. Indeed the most successful sectors have been those in which the government has been absent. Prosperous despite the state (Das) & Nihelani. 'The economy grows while the government sleeps'. With the ever increasing role of the private sector as the driver of Indian growth, there is an obvious requirement to balance the needs of the citizens with those of the private business. The imperatives of economic liberalization and globalization require diminishing the role of government in overall national activity, posing a dilemma for New Delhi (Perkovich, 2003). While democracy provides the long-disadvantaged an opportunity to mobilize and compete for control of government,

unregulated private markets do not, potentially intensifying political conflict (Perkovich, 2003). It is however the private sector that offer the greatest potential to create jobs and drive economic growth. Due to liberalisation, the Indian economy has improved dramatically.

“ The reform process has registered a 6 percent average annual growth rate for nearly a quarter century... Over the last three years, it has grown at over 8 percent annually.....It is hard to escape the impression that market interests and democratic principles are uneasily aligned” (Varshney, 2007).

The opening up of India’s economy and the embracing of globalisation has proved irreversible[22]. Combined with the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission this period also heralded the demise of Congress hegemony, to the extent that coalition government has now become a pillar of Indian politics. One-party dominance is gone[23].

Rise of Plebeian Politics and Coalition Politics

India’s body politic has moved from being dominated after independence by elite English-speaking urban, majority upper castes politicians to a now more plebeian political thrust. The social makeup of participation has moved distinctly downwards - towards the rural & lower castes. The turnout in villages is higher than in urban India[24], the odds of a scheduled caste citizen voting were 2. 3% higher than the national average. The greatest increase in voting has taken place in tribal constituencies (Varshney, 2000). In this way caste as well as religion, have materialized as the fundamental base of support in Indian politics. Caste groups are however often as bitterly

divided amongst each other as much as they are with Brahmin and upper caste groupings[25].

OBC, SC & ST parties total vote share is significantly lower than the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or Congress, but they are enough to force through concessions in coalition government. Despite the disunity of political parties it is fair to say lower-caste politics are now a permanent fixture with preserving the existing system of patronage-based subsidies being the *raison d'être* of many lower-caste political parties (Luce, 2009). In many ways the motivation for many SC/ST parties is not to abolish caste disparity but gain leverage over each other. Despite Ambedkar's call for annihilation of the caste system, it has remained, and became further entrenched.

Increased competition in electoral politics in which Dalit votes make a big difference has prompted both the BJP and Congress to woo the Dalit vote[26]. They are a minority in every state and in most command between 10% and 20% of the vote[27]. Indeed Dalits have formed successful political parties, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which is now in power in UP, and also have nationally known leaders, including UP Chief Minister, Mayawati, who it was suggested may even have been positioned as a potential Prime Minister[28]. It is fair to assert caste disparity is firmly embedded in the Indian body politic.

India's modernisation and liberalisation, have thus witnessed the country become less secular and more ethnically divided than before, entrenching caste and religious divisions instead of facilitating the demise of caste and communalism. India is an increasingly Hindu nationalist country as opposed

to a secular socialist democratic republic. With this we have seen a clear increase in incidents of political and communal violence, most vividly played out in the caste wars in Bihar, Hindu Muslim violence in 1992/1993[29] and again in Gujarat in 2002[30]. The overarching ideology of Hindu nationalism poses a new challenge. Nehru's vision of secularism, socialism and non-alignment is now on its last legs, if not dead already, while the BJP Hindutva vision is gaining more and more momentum[31]. BJP – vision.

INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT MODEL & DEMOCRACY

“ Development is by definition and practice a radical and commonly turbulent process that is concerned with far-reaching and rapid change in the structure and use of wealth, and which-to be successful – it must transform.” (Leftwich, 2002)

Democratic politics as it is now in India is that of compromise, “ it is consensual, conservative and incremental in the change it brings about” (Leftwich, 2002). India's has not adopted the same development of those in its neighbourhood – the Asian Tigers[32]. While India is a democracy the Asian tigers development all had either autocratic or very restrictive political systems in place. None of them had labour rights or labour rights were very restrictive[33], free trade unions[34] or a free press[35]. It is worth noting also that unlike India on the whole the Asian Tigers have a far more homogenous population[36]. Some scholars argue that democracy is needed to keep a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious country like India intact (Desai). India's rapid economic growth in the context of a democracy is on the whole without parallel. Evans (2001), however

warns against any assumed symbiotic relationship between democracy and <https://assignbuster.com/assessing-development-and-democracy-in-india-politics-essay/>

human rights. While democracy can endorse equitable development, the goals of democracy and equity should be considered largely independent. Deficiencies in accountability and checks and balances have led to many democracies degenerating into havens of corruption, where the powerful always triumph[37](Eapen 2004). Indeed the relationship between democracy and development is often problematic, in this sense developing countries often accuse proponents of democracy of placing the ' democratic cart' before the ' economic horse' (Mahbabani , 1992). Leftwich (2002) argues that democracies have great difficulty in taking " rapid and far reaching steps to reduce structural inequalities in wealth, whether they be based on class, colour, ethnicity, religion or a combination of them".

The objectives of competing groups in a developing country like India are often simply to capture public resources and engage in destructive types of corruption and accumulation to enrich their faction (Khan 2002). As we have seen with the upsurge in plebeian politics in India, by legitimising and intensifying contestation between essentially unproductive groups, democracy can make destructive rent-seeking worse (Khan 2002). This can also be applied to India as discussed with patronage being the *raison d'être* for many caste groups, and the rise of Mayawati for example, using her power to increase her own faction.

India's experience also illustrates that democracy has encumbered development in a number of ways. Short term pandering and handouts to the electorate has impeded long-term investment, particularly in physical infrastructure, which has been to the detriment of Indian economic growth & development[38](Bardhan, 2006). To the disgruntlement of international
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financial institutions and credit rating agencies, India's treasury maintains considerable budget deficits, in the certain knowledge that holding back in government spending could end a coalition().

Neither can democratic systems such as India push thru economically beneficial legislation amid rival parties jockeying interests, in the way that autocratic regimes can, particularly pertinent in India's case (). Nor does India have the option of engaging in policy experimentation open to it, in the way that China has done, as the risk of the consequences of failure at the ballot box are too great. Democratic incumbency is another significant drawback to Indian development[39]. Elections have become India's institutionalized ' political common sense' (Varshney 2005). Essentially no one party remains long enough in power to follow through on policy reform and implementation. Singh was voted out at the beginning of the Early 2000's, the BJP came in and now Singh is back and the threat of being ejected from government makes it worse. Coalition further exasperates this difficulty.

The same is the case with corruption and the crime/politics nexus (Desai, 2002 & Luce, 2007)[40]. The importance of openness in democratic politics is apparent when considering Sen's argument that democracy, because it circulates information better, has been more successful in the prevention of famines in India[41]. The study is frequently considered in looking at the advantages of democratic systems more generally. Sen argues that democracies allow the poor to penalize or vote out governments that allow famines to occur thus placing a greater impetus on political

representatives to prevent the root cause. He also argues that democracies
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are better than autocracies at disseminating information from underprivileged and isolated to the central government, owing to political rights such as the freedom of the press and freedom of speech.

The level of literacy is fundamental to this argument however, and literacy rates in India are relatively poor. Also highly significant is to whom the journalistic discourse appeals to. In India the media generally addresses the upper class and educated middleclass, as the vast majority of the poor and most marginalized are illiterate. It can be argued too that with this same section of Indian society, whom the media primarily address are those who are reaping the rewards of India's economic prosperity, and who are thus to a large extent placated. The discontent expressed within the media may well be falling on deaf ears[42]. Bhagwati (1999) reminds us that it is the views that are expressed, be they those of the rulers or the ruled that is of paramount importance over the actual freedom of the press.

Conclusion

" India certainly affords its citizens more freedoms than China, but it is hardly a liberal democratic paradise" (Crossette - 2010).

Democracy have been the ' putty' that has held India together[43](Desai). It is however erroneous to equate a multi party democracy political system with high quality institutions. Politics in India has become more consensual and less elitist but at the same time more corrupt and self-serving. Coalition and patronage politics of social factions have combined to make government expenditure a variable outside political control. Castes and religious divisions are used like pawns in the ' electoral game'. Political power is the route to

the rewards of patronage for communities which have little chance in the liberal market order for economic gain. By resorting to political patronage, caste disparity has become further entrenched.

No major observer denies that India is a democracy, but particularly in states like Bihar where corruption, criminality, murder, and kidnapping heavily taint the electoral process, it is an illiberal and degraded one[44]. The decline of secularism and socialism, the rise of liberalism and religiosity, the persistence of nationalism as a force. BJP. On the other side Congress, has pledged it will pursue inclusive growth, clarifying that inclusion will come when growth rates remain sustained at a high level and as long as it takes to make the laudable goal feasible of public expenditure on education, health and welfare. Their strategy operates on the premise that inclusion is an end goal and cannot happen simultaneously with the growth process.

The ‘ world’s largest free market democracy’.

India’s economic growth in the context of a democracy is on the whole unprecedented. But it is increasingly questionable as to whether democracy is the variable in India’s strategy to sustain economic growth and development? Opening up to the free market has sharpened marginalisation and inequality, certainly in India’s case the structures of political power, are being propped up by corporate tycoons and powerful lobbies, the risk being this leads to the democratic political process being hijacked and corrupted. Thus the imperatives of democracy and development require that civil society have to remain constantly alert.

Very much a trickle down, rising tide lifts all boats model as opposed to a bottom-up mechanism. Only about 10 percent of Indians have benefited from all that development and progress. India's development has no meaning for the vast majority of Indians.

It is instructive to take note of the issues that the GOI attempts to deal with, the methods they use to address them and the problems they choose to ignore. Governments have chosen to consistently act with deliberation and resolve to support the cause of economic powerhouses. In many cases these have caused direct conflict with often some of the most vulnerable communities. Often the state chooses to be oblivious of the constitutional rights of these communities in its policies and their implementation.

Through policies that consistently choose to represent economic interests even at the cost of constitutional rights, the democratic Indian State is losing its credibility. India's development drive has called into question the credibility of Indian democracy.

Crucially Schedler draws a distinction between electoral democracy and electoral authoritarianism based "crucially on the freedom, fairness, inclusiveness, and meaningfulness of elections" (Schedler, 1998 & Diamond, 2002).